

Have Orchestra – Will Travel

**(With the Youth Orchestra of St Peters Lutheran College, Brisbane.)
Conductor: Antoni Bonetti**

by Ruth Bonetti

In the highlights and lowlifes of touring a young orchestra, surely this ranks tops of the latter experiences:

You're escorting your teenaged orchestra through the security checks at the Australian Parliament House in Canberra on a lay-day when an official approaches you.

"Excuse me, Sir, but do you realise that one of your students has a machete in his personal baggage?"

"*Why?*" you incredulously ask the culprit, son of an army officer.

"Because, sir, in case I needed to defend myself on the trip."

Welcome to a roadie's perspective of touring as support act, chaperone, soloist, narrator, whatever... What we do for love! When your husband Antoni Bonetti runs a busy string and orchestral program, tours are highlights. This 2004 tour began with an acclaimed home-base pre-tour concert at The Conservatorium of Music, Griffith University as guest school orchestra for the recent Brisbane TOAN Conference 2004. Now the group heads along the freeway for Newcastle via Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Tamworth, to play works by Beethoven, Brahms, Dvorak, Stravinsky and various topical movie themes.

Being busy with other activities I missed the last few tours to New Zealand and central Queensland, so now, as I take my place at the front of the bus, I feel a little out of touch for the first hours. We soon slot back into the routine.

"Mr. Bonetti, can we put on a video?"

"After lunch."

It is all so familiar.

Multi-skilling is an asset when the number of bus seats is calculated as to size of vehicles. We have a secret weapon in our regular bus driver Denis Hoey, who doubles as keyboardist/ percussionist and occasional conductor according to need. He is himself a registered teacher so carries clout when discipline is needed. Denis has been on three tours so it's familiar territory.

Ah, the highs and lows of touring a school orchestra.

The all-out highs; those standing ovations which didn't need to be milked; the packed houses playing the Star Wars Overture (the original version) by John Williams to an audience of 2,000 at Sea World on the Gold Coast.

The increased confidence and sophisticated level of performance from the players. When the orchestra rose to standards unexpected; when they took on tour half-learned pieces and by the end of the tour played them brilliantly.

There are the fun moments of down-time; the jet-boats in New Zealand; attending the Phantom of the Opera in Melbourne and inviting the conductor to rehearse and give a concert with the orchestra the next day; experiencing the atmosphere of Tasmania's Port Arthur settlement then performing Berlioz' Witches Dance from the *Symphonie Fantastique* in the gloomy Separate Prison.

The toughest memories linger from 1994's four-state tour via Broken Hill and Adelaide. There was no water cooler and no toilet in the bus and often after travelling twelve hour stretches, we rushed straight into rehearsals (and what do you say when arriving for a collaboration with a small town orchestra when they proudly point to their one timpano) or performances. Many avoided the taste of strange waters in 'foreign' cities. Looking back, we blame dehydration for much of the group's increased illness, exhaustion and loss of resilience. We now stipulate that all bring water bottles if buses have no water cooler.

Mind, it did not help that Bonetti sons leashed chicken pox on the touring party, and no doubt the billet families and schools visited. Here my roles conflicted uncomfortably; as a mother, I thought of jumping ship with the poxed son but realised the infection process was already complete. Besides how does one dispense with a clarinet soloist, narrator for Britten's Young Person's Guide to the Orchestra and chaperone? We had to grit our teeth and forge on. Apologies to those who endured a chicken pox plague but we are told it's better to get this over early in life.

In true tradition, the shows went on. But how did they fare?

Well, the Canberra Times reported: "Orchestra showed technical skills... impressive musical ensemble for a school orchestra... played with great spirit and rhythmic impulse."

By the time the busloads limped home, we were all worn and exhausted; a sizable number had been taken to the doctors with flu as well as chicken pox, while we waited for the trailer to be fixed. Our last concert was down to one-third strength due to illness.

MEMO; TRAVEL WITH A DOCTOR! An ill horn or bassoon player is a major loss to the performance.

Yet, there were amazing highs; being the first orchestra ever to play a concert in the Wellington "Cathedral" Caves near Dubbo. Sure, it meant a gargantuan operation of humping timpani, double basses and music stands – a ton of gear – down the steps to the caves. All efforts were justified in an exhilarating concert. They performed amongst other works Saint-Saens' Dance Macabre with a "skeleton" violinist roaming amongst the startled audience Nigel Kennedy style.

Of course, international touring ranks tops as highlights. In 1995 we fronted the airline check-in (after an evening Gala concert the night before, ending at 11.00pm) for the grand overseas tour, taking a party of 70 to perform in Germany, France, Denmark, England. We arrived in Frankfurt to every tour

director's nightmare. The trailers supplied were far too small for the percussion and double basses. Times like these orchestral directors envy choral directors. Antoni has disappeared into the bowels of Frankfurt airport to talk bureaucratise – fortunately he speaks German so the drama is diminished for a mere few hours while the orchestra warms its heels out in draughty waiting halls. A short-term solution is to leave some gear behind, hoping it will catch up by the first performance.

At last it's onto the autobahn, and a long haul to the north of Germany where we're nurtured in the welcoming arms of host families. And what a welcome we receive. With that exceptional German organisation, the couple in charge have made great efforts to match people with like-minded billets. Our doctor is billeted with a doctor, others with similar ages or instruments. So successful is this initial taste of German hospitality that there are many tears when the bus leaves four days later. The long journey to the Black Forest area is broken with a Rhine Cruise and overnight accommodation in two youth, one a fort overlooking the Rhine, the other a castle.

What a hardship, performing in Euro Disney! After which the students receive their usual instructions: "STAY IN GROUPS OF FOUR AND MEET AT THE FRONT GATE AT 6pm." And yes, they do. Musical groups tend to be reliable, disciplined and trustworthy.

Then there are lows which roller coaster into highs; when one of the buses breaks down on the French freeway, we wait an hour in the cold, huddling and singing to boost spirits until the back-up arrives. After seemingly endless drive to London, (via unlimited duty-free shopping on the channel crossing) we check into accommodation, find food at a late hour, wash and iron smelly uniforms then after minimal sleep unload percussion gear next morning in the rain into the venue and then on to the next performance. Which is an exhilarating high, one of those exceptional moments that make the tour worthwhile.

For me there's an interesting chain of events; to play a double concerto – Mendelssohn's *Konzertstücke* in d minor Opus 14 for clarinet and basset horn – with a former student in Germany and then with my own former teacher, Thea King in London.

The orchestra has made two overseas tours and six east coast of Australia tours in the past 14 years. It has given combined concerts with a range of other orchestras, from Australian and European Youth Orchestras and community orchestras to professional orchestras spanning the length of the country from Brisbane to Burnie.

St Peters Orchestra has worked with a variety of professional musicians including Tommy Tycho, James Cuddeford and Warwick Adeney.

Organising a tour requires meticulous planning, with responsibility for a group of young people weighing on the tour director's shoulders – and that before he even

lifts the baton! There are other cyclic swings and roundabouts; after brilliant fourth term concerts, having to say goodbye to star year 12 players of crucial instruments such as horns, bassoons and oboes, and finding the grace to encourage fledging players next February. Having the tenacity to re-grow the program and standard; sometimes music directors might be forgiven moments of asking “Why? What now? How many years till we can regain the next high?” At such times it helps to pull out the files and read comments such as these from one of those star departing year 12 students:

As a student wrote after the European tour;
“We learned not only that the European moon is upside down and that European water runs down the drain in the wrong direction: more importantly, we learned that the world is much bigger than what we see around us. We learned that other people, just like us, live all over the globe; that these people have the same hopes, dreams and desires as us; and that no matter where we are, we all worship the same God – be it in German, French or English.”

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Information about the Youth Orchestra of St Peter at
www.stpeters.qld.edu.au
About Antoni Bonetti: www.antonibonetti.com

About Ruth Bonetti

Ruth Bonetti writes a complimentary fortnightly E-Zine for teachers: *Music Educators' Energiser* and the weekly *MusoMotivator* (nominal charge). Those interested to receive this can sign up at <http://ruthbonetti.com> or by emailing ruth@ruthbonetti.com

Her recent books *Confident Music Performance; Fix the fear of facing an audience* and *Practice is a Dirty Word; How to clean up your act* (Words and Music) are available at www.RuthBonetti.com
She compiled the method *Enjoy Playing the Clarinet* (Oxford University Press) and was Editorial Consultant for the AMEB Clarinet Grade.

Ruth's music and speaking career, helping musicians and speakers to perform with confidence, has taken her around Australia, Europe (speaking German, French and Swedish) and the United States, where her seminars were repeated by popular demand, and she was invited to return the next year.

Her presentation topics include:

Student Seminar Topics:

- How to Practice for Success
- How to Prepare for a Confident Performance
- How to Shine in Performance
- The Examiner Speaks: How to succeed in exams

- 7 Easy Habits for Confident Performance
- Faculty Professional Development Topics:**
- How to Motivate Students to Practice
 - Speak Out with a Confident Voice
 - Confident Parent – Teacher Communication
- Keynote Presentation**
- Take Five Tips for Confident Performance

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